

1 Introduction

International Development policy is marked by contradictory ideological-discursive movements and counter-movements at the global, regional, and national scales. On the one hand, global Development policy has charted a trajectory over recent decades towards increased recognition of, and policy positioning around, localisation and locally-led development, with a significant investment of overseas development assistance (ODA) in civil society and non-governmental organisations (CSO/NGO) (Novovic 2021; Mohen and Stokkes 2008). But, to date, the reality falls short of the ambitious policy rhetoric in practice (Murphy et al. forthcoming). Further, this rearticulated understanding of development effectiveness, which emanates from international organisations, institutions, fora, and agreements, looks under threat of coming undone. Newly emboldened and emerging political factions, alignments, and administrations are increasingly turning inwards to national and regional (economic and foreign) policy prerogatives, with a consequent divergence from global cooperation in the face of heightened geo-political/economic tensions, uncertainties, and competition/conflict.

The European Union (EU) is a case in point, wherein an increasingly fractured national and regional political milieu has emerged. In 2022 the Qatargate bribery and corruption scandal erupted in the European Parliament. Several high-profile members of the European Parliament (MEPs) were accused of accepting political bribes and cash from the Qatari government in exchange for political favours. The cash was allegedly funnelled to MEPs through fake non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The scandal turbocharged parliamentary scrutiny of NGOs and provided an opportunity to introduce new measures to facilitate closer oversight of NGO-CSO funding relationships and lobbying activities.

Of central concern in this respect are partnerships with (non-EU) third parties/countries, and in particular the participation in aid chain networks (e.g. via sub- or on-granting) of foreign actors and organisations, often with presumed malicious intentions (Harth et al. 2023). That such EU-centric positioning somewhat contradicts the bloc's own public statements concerning the overregulation and suppression of NGOs – especially those promoting Western values and principles – both internally (in EU member states like Hungary) and externally (in non-EU European nations like Russia) is not lost on close observers of these unfolding events (ibid.). It also distracts from necessary transparency and accountability reforms of the corporate lobby in the EU more generally. In the EU parliamentary debates that followed Qatargate, calls emerged for non-EU NGOs involved in EU-funded development cooperation to be more heavily regulated and monitored, while pre-certified EU-based NGOs should be protected. This is contradictory only from the perspective of advancing universal transparency and accountability standards in economic organisations, while remaining entirely consistent with the EU-centric geostrategic drift of the bloc's supranational institutions.

But such shifts do not occur in a vacuum. What then are the longer-term, wider world-historical processes and dynamic transitions at play in this rearticulation of EU international Development policy and governance practice? How/do these processes influence the dialectical international D/development regime (Hart 2010)? How does this affect EU deliberations over the transparency and accountability of NGO funding in the development cooperation space (Harth et al. 2023)? And what might we say about possible directions of travel given the ongoing deterioration of global cooperation more generally (Carmody 2024)? This paper explores these questions.

In section 2 we place contemporary D/developments in their longer-term historical context, focusing in particular on the period since the global / North Atlantic financial crisis of 2008 (see Carmody 2019; Lapavitsas et al. 2023; Alami and Dixon 2024). International D/development regime shifts are rooted in successive rounds of economic and institutional dislocation, crisis, and socially innovative reassemblage in the world system – in other words, 'systemic cycles of accumulation [turbulence] and chaos' (Galanis et al. 2024). We contend that the world system is in a protracted period of systemic turbulence, characterised by growing disorder, disintegration, experimentation, and competition/conflict over alternative courses of institutional reordering (ibid.). This interregnum and its morbid symptoms (including a deepening ecological rift) are rooted in the structural crisis of globalised and financialised neoliberal capitalism (Lapavitsas et al. 2023; Fraser 2023; McDonough et al. 2021). The main consequence for the D/development dialectic appears to be the emergence of competing *varieties of 'state capitalism'* (Alami et al. 2021), taken generally to signify a reassertion of the state's role in inter/national D/development policy (ibid.).

Section 3 outlines the methodology and methods employed in this study. We carry out a comparative critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) of four interrelated, yet distinct, EU Development policies and parliamentary reports concerning

the transparency and accountability of NGO funding in this space. *The European Consensus* (European Commission 2017) policy is the foundational statement on EU development cooperation, an intended touchstone for subsequent documents and reports in this area. *The Global Gateway Initiative* (European Commission, 2021) is the latest iteration of the EU's positioning on development cooperation. In between the publication of both documents, and perhaps helping to explain their contradictory divergence, the European Court of Auditors (2018) concluded its report into the transparency and accountability of NGOs' (part) funding through the EU. This document also informed a parliamentary motion and adopted resolution on the same topic (EU Parliament 2024). Using NVivo 14, we track the discursive-ideological shift sequentially throughout the period of publication (2017-2024). Section 4 presents our findings, tracing a distinct turn away from localisation, locally-led development, and the promotion of universal rights and values towards greater EU-centricism and related state interference in the third sector, somewhat renouncing its existing commitments to localisation. Section 5 includes some tentative conclusions and suggestions about possible future directions of travel.

2 D/development regime shifts amidst the *Second Cold War*

2.1 From locally-led development to the de-risking state

Emerging from the development effectiveness debates that commenced in the early-2000s, when decades of neoliberal reforms delivered under the Washington Consensus failed to achieve targeted human development gains (Schindler et al. 2023a), followed by further failures of the post-Washington Consensus development period (Alami et al. 2021), localisation and locally-led development paradigms have been to the forefront of national and international development cooperation policy formation (Barakat and Milton 2020). Following Gillian Hart's (2010) influential critical geopolitical economy framing, the rhetorical-aspirational shift in international 'big D' Development cooperation towards localisation appears in reality to have been constrained by the imperatives of 'little d' (globalised and financialised) neoliberal (state) capitalist development (Murphy et al. forthcoming).

In theory, it is not immediately clear why neoliberalism should be expected to constrain or hamper localisation given its embrace of *the ideology of decentralised market competition* (Mohan and Stokke 2008). However, tracing its historical lineage, the neoliberal capitalist state has always relied on the undercurrent and ultimate backstop of political authoritarianism (counterpart to the economic concentration and centralisation of capital), particularly when coming under sustained counterattack or pressure from organised labour/social/environmental movements (Hart 2010). Hence, while it permits – even encourages – rhetorical discourses and *selective* practices of political and economic decentralisation, localisation, and autonomy, the resulting outsized liberal political-economic imaginary operates as cover for the essentially authoritarian neoliberal centralisation, concentration, and consolidation of (monopoly-finance) capitalist (state) power and profit (Harvey 2007; Mirowski 2014; Lapavitsas et al. 2023).

Neoliberalism, in this telling, is perhaps most concisely defined as 'the dependence upon the strong state to pursue the disenchantment of politics by economics' (Mirowski 2014: 22). In the process, '[n]eoliberal politics actually favors both administrative decentralization and the maximization of local autonomy', given that rhetorical discourses and *selective* practices of '[d]ecentralization and autonomy are primary vehicles for producing greater inequality through neo-liberalization' (Harvey 2012: 82–83) of the capitalist state apparatus (e.g. through selective privatisation, liberalisation, and deregulation that benefits monopoly-finance capital). Granted, this neoliberal localisation agenda also contains tensions, contradictions, and thus holds out (unintended) progressive as well as regressive possibilities (Hart 2010).

Concerning the D/development dialectic more directly, '[t]he human rights movement also helped to propel the massive burgeoning of NGOs all over the world in the 1980s, many of which took on the mantle of "global civil society", helping to implement neoliberal reforms while also managing some of the destructive fallout' (Hart 2010: 130). 'The intertwining of neoliberal economic policies with liberal discourses of democracy and human rights' (ibid.) is characteristic then of the localisation agenda in international Development discourse and policy, at least at the level of the capitalist state and supranational development bodies; though it should be stressed that practices and outcomes vary widely across relatively autonomous CSOs/NGOs (Brass et al. 2018; Banks 2021).

This helps to explain the disjuncture between discursive theories of localised 'big D' international development, and the reality in practice of relatively little (selective) follow-through on corollary policy commitments (Murphy et al. forthcoming). Such theoretical discourse appears to operate primarily as political cover for selective and contradictory practices that ultimately aim to centralise, concentrate, and consolidate the 'soft power' of donor states and regional allies in the (increasingly) contested field of international relations (see Moyo 2009; Carmody 2019, 2024). Hart (2010: 130), for example,

observes that ‘the market orthodoxy that seemed so firmly entrenched in the early 1990s gave way to far more overtly interventionist moves to contain disruptive tendencies’ arising from economic liberalisation, such as subaltern struggles and anti-systemic/anti-globalisation movements that threaten neoliberal capitalist (state) power and profit. This authoritarian/neoliberal reaction involved ‘multinational and bilateral aid agencies actively reasserting and extending their mission of trusteeship *in the name of* Development, good governance, participation, social capital, and so forth’ (ibid. emphasis added).

What has emerged then, particularly since the global / North Atlantic financial crisis of 2008 – ushering the structural crisis of neoliberal capitalism and associated (geo) political, economic, social, and ecological upheaval (Lapavitsas et al. 2023; Fraser 2023; McDonough et al. 2021) – is an ongoing turn to *varieties of* (neoliberal-authoritarian) ‘state capitalism’ in the ‘new global D/development regime’ (Alami et al. 2021; Alami and Dixon 2024). Such variation in part reflects the historical contingency of the present conjuncture, and geostrategic struggles over the shape of the new global D/development regime (Lapavitsas et al., 2023). As Hart observes, ‘While crises of capitalism hold out progressive possibilities, they also carry significant dangers – including the rise of new forms of fascism, racism, and xenophobia’ (2010: 134). Much depends on the outcome of indeterminate class and social struggles, carried forward within the confines of historically given circumstances (Silver 2019; Fraser 2013; McDonough et al. 2021).

The rearticulation of the global D/development regime therefore plays out in the context of inter/national contestation and socio-spatial struggle over alternative programmes of geo-political-economic reform. Social struggles do not unfold in a historical or institutional vacuum, such that structural conditions (indeterminately) circumscribe the menu of likely/possible systemic crisis resolutions (Silver 2013, 2019).ⁱⁱ The default crisis response of neoliberal incumbency is institutional recovery through liberal political-economic piecemeal reform, rather than institutional reordering through fundamental structural reform, further entrenching the power of capital at the expense of labour and indefinitely prolonging (by attempting to stabilise relatively stagnant and unstable capital accumulation) the structural crisis of neoliberal capitalism (Kotz 2015; Lapavitsas et al. 2023; Fraser 2023; Durand 2024).

This is reflected, paradoxically, in the increasing reliance of national, multilateral, and supranational Development actors on rhetorical discourses and selective practices of (neoliberal/authoritarian) ‘state capitalism’ – i.e. ‘a significant *redefinition* of the Development project, in the context of the restructuring of global capitalism and profound geopolitical shifts’; one that is ‘not only characterised by the further entrenchment of the centrality of market regulation, but also, crucially, by a *strategic ideological adjustment* concerning the place of the state in Development, including a partial embrace of its role as *promoter, supervisor, and owner of capital*’ (Alami et al. 2021: 1295, original emphasis). There is thus ‘a persistence of neoliberal thinking in this agenda’ (ibid.), which seeks to consolidate and expand market regulation under the auspices of the strong state (see also Alami and Dixon 2024).

This strategic ideological *adjustment* indicates that traditional Development actors acknowledge (even if grudgingly) the successes of the developmental state, particularly given the rise of China and the Global South and associated ‘liberal anxiety with the direction in which the political form of global capital accumulation may be heading’ (Alami et al. 2021: 1296–7). This delicate balancing act involves ‘re-legitimation of the state in Development, and a limited embrace of state-owned capital’ (Alami et al. 2021: 1296),ⁱⁱⁱ entwined with the further entrenchment of international market-based private finance. It is exemplified by the ‘de-risking state’ – the increasingly assertive so-called ‘Wall Street Consensus’ (WSC) in Western development cooperation discourse and practice (Gabor 2020).

To elaborate, paradoxically, the WSC ‘pushes developing countries to become more attractive to private financial capital, at the expense of state-led industrialisation and development strategies’ (Alami et al. 2021: 1295), thereby leveraging the strong arm of the (de-risking) state to rearticulate and readjust the neoliberal strategic-ideological goals of the post-Washington Consensus. This is achieved primarily through (de-risking) state partnership with, and state subsidisation of, international market-based private financial capital in the design-through-delivery of development cooperation initiatives, thus ‘risk-proofing development assets’ from financial loss (Gabor 2020). As discussed in the remainder of the paper, de-risking is the expressed strategic-ideological orientation of the EU’s rearticulation of its international Development policy through the Global Gateway Initiative (European Commission 2021; 2024).

2.2 Stuck in the middle: placing the EU in the US-China hegemonic contest

Liberal anxieties over the direction of global capitalist restructuring have their material-ideological genesis and political-economic basis in the 2008 crash and secular stagnation that followed (Schindler 2023b: 9). Enhanced inter/state

intervention in dysfunctional private capitalist markets was re-legitimised first in response to the 2008 financial crash, and then again in response to the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. The Chinese Communist Party-controlled state was particularly assertive in both instances, displaying mass coordinated fiscal and monetary policy interventions of global reach and significance. China's geo-political-economic rise and effective crisis management were duly noted in the Global South, laying the basis for its increased development cooperation presence through the Belt and Road Initiative since 2013 (Lapavitsas et al. 2023). As a consequence, China is now widely seen in the West as a 'strategic competitor', rather than its previous status as a 'strategic partner' (ibid.), in the battle of ideas and policies shaping the emergence of a new international D/development regime (Alami et al. 2021; Schindler et al. 2023a).

Regulationist political economy suggests two likely/possible resolutions to this ongoing structural crisis of neoliberal capitalist D/development. They consist of the emergence and consolidation of: 1) global cooperation between Keynesian social democratic 'green developmental states' (Gabor 2020; Chomsky & Pollin 2020); or 2) global interstate competition/conflict based upon authoritarian nationalist conservative Keynesianism (Toporowski 2023).

In the interregnum, the hegemonic form of neoliberal capitalism appears to be shifting from previously dominant 'progressive neoliberalism' (see Fraser, 2013, 2017) – an apparent oxymoron combining social liberalism and economic liberalisation – towards 'national neoliberalism' (Breger Bush, 2016) – yet another apparent oxymoron combining social conservatism with economic liberalisation and autarkic protectionism (whereby globalisation is weakened, but financialisation and neoliberalisation are further entrenched both domestically and internationally). Hence the (structural) crisis tendencies underpinning secular stagnation and financial/social/ecological instabilities endure amidst sharpening geostrategic rivalry (Durand 2024; Lapavitsas et al. 2023; Fraser 2023). Growing US-China geo-political-economic tensions and conflicts – and the EU's 'stuck-in-the-middle-ness' (Biba 2024) – can be understood more clearly in this light, given that 'Xi's "national rejuvenation" and Trump's "Make America Great Again" entrenched antagonistic foreign policy in both countries, leading to a consensus that the two are locked in zero-sum competition a clash of restorative projects' in response to the financial crash (Schindler et al. 2023b: 9).

Central to this is their competitive projection on the world stage as leading international Development partners (Schindler et al. 2023b: 11). It helps to explain broader Western and Eastern drift towards varieties of 'authoritarian state capitalism' (ibid), with the 'de-risking state' (facilitating international market-based private finance) the preferred mechanism in the West (Gabor 2020; Biba 2024); meanwhile, China's 'interventions are based on direct ownership and command over both productive resources and finance' (Lapavitsas et al. 2023: 273), with implications for the shape of emerging non-Western international development finance initiatives and institutions through the BRICS(+) formation (Alami et al. 2021; Carmody 2024).

That said, there appears to be significant scope for strategic autonomy from either of the emerging US- or China-led models of international Development finance. This depends crucially on partner states' respective levels of national economic development and related geopolitical bargaining power (Schindler et al. 2023a; Biba 2024). As a relatively powerful and highly developed regional supranational institution, the EU potentially has the best of both worlds, given that, as things stand, its largest trading partners are the United States and China (Biba, 2024; Farrell and Newman 2023). Yet, notwithstanding its stated desire for greater 'strategic autonomy' from both poles of the US-China hegemonic contest (Biba, 2024; European Commission, 2024), the EU has increasingly aligned itself with US foreign policy on China (Biba, 2024). As Schindler et al. (2023) observe, the EU referred to China as a 'systemic rival' in 2019 and has since proposed de-risking the EU's economic relationship with China. This again creates tensions within and between EU member states' national foreign policy stances, as some of the largest economies in the bloc are members of the Belt and Road initiative (Lapavitsas et al. 2023; Farrell and Newman 2023).

Taking view of the *longue durée*, Schindler et al. (2023b) historicise the emergent US-China hegemonic contest as the 'Second Cold War', noting its distinct politico-ideological and spacio-territorial dimensions from the first Cold War. They offer 'a process-oriented analysis in which the Cold War and the contemporary US-China rivalry are conceptualised as discrete periods in a longer historical sequence whose unifying principle is a sustained challenge to the US-led international order' (p. 2). This type of analysis, and its implications for the shifting international D/development regime, has strong parallels with Arrighi and Silver's 'critical elaboration and extension of Polanyi's theory of imperialism along Gramscian lines to highlight the distinctive geopolitical and economic reconfigurations of finance capital, industrialism, and militarism that marked the *belle époques* of British and US hegemony a century apart' (Hart 2010: 120). It also resonates with embedded Polanyian-Gramscian-Marxian conceptualisations of the double/triple political-cultural counter/movement within historical

capitalism; this refers to ‘pendulum swings’ between economically liberal/deregulated and socially protected/emancipated qualitative institutional forms (Silver, 2013, 2019; Fraser, 2013).

Regulationist long swings or counter/movements between forms of capitalism where the protection of fictitious commodities is ‘too low’ producing eventual legitimacy crises, or ‘too high’ producing eventual profitability crises (either form of capitalism/crisis creating cumulative structural countertendencies towards its opposite) are intermediate institutional oscillations within longer-term ‘systemic cycles of accumulation [turbulence] and chaos in the world capitalist system’ (Galanis et al. 2024). These latter ‘hegemonic cycles’ track the rise and fall of hegemonic regimes in the global political economy. Hegemonic cycles/regimes (or systemic cycles of accumulation) span multiple pendulum swings in the institutional form (or social structure of accumulation) of capitalism and culminate in hegemonic crises and transitions that generally coincide with particular structural crises of financialised forms of capitalism (see also Li et al. 2007). The hegemonic cycle thus invokes intermediate ‘social/spatio-temporal fixes’ (*temporarily* relocating crisis tendencies through institutional innovation, spatial expansion, and geographic reorganisation) and longer-term ‘switching crises’ (involving increasing recourse to finance-led accumulation as a last refuge) (Galanis et al. 2024).

According to the theory of systemic cycles of accumulation (SCA), ‘each long cycle is composed of two phases: The first phase (A-phase) exhibits stability while the second one (B-phase) is characterised by turbulence and geographical shifts’ (Galanis et al. 2024: 3), as well an increasing shift from industrial to finance capital as the global hegemon’s ‘dominant source of profits’ (ibid.). Hence hegemonic crises tend to correspond with structural crises of economically liberal/deregulated (and thereby financialised) forms of capitalism, producing at first growing turbulence and then eventual chaos in the capitalist world system. Silver (2013, 2019) maps a periodisation of decades-long capitalist institutional pendulum swings within global hegemonic regimes, and century-long hegemonic shifts (see also Li et al. 2007). As to the present conjuncture,

For the past several decades (more or less since the 1980s) we have been living through a period in which the financial fix has become a dominant strategy for restoring capitalist profits. The end of the nineteenth century and first two decades of the twentieth century was another such period . . . The latest financialisation of capitalism gathered steam in the late twentieth century as it became increasingly clear that spatial, technological and product fixes were at best only temporary and local solutions to crises of profitability and labour control. (Silver 2013: 64)

Silver refers here to the structural crisis of postwar social democratic or ‘regulated’ capitalism, and transition to the finance-led accumulation regime of neoliberal capitalism (see also Hein et al. 2015; Kotz 2015). This institutional pendulum swing coincides, as per Galanis et al.’s (2024: 4) reformulation of the SCA, with ‘the B-phase [in the hegemonic cycle] composed of two distinct sub-phases – turbulence and chaos – that prepare the hegemonic shift’. Accordingly, the turbulent capital accumulation of the neoliberal era increasingly threatens outright chaos for the hegemonic regime,^{iv} particularly since the 2008 financial crash; yet a series of piecemeal reforms and state interventions following successive crises have largely succeeded in (temporarily) stabilising a relatively stagnant and unstable accumulation regime (Lapavitsas et al. 2023). In Silver’s reading of the present conjuncture, ‘the odds are increasing that . . . we have entered another long period of global systemic chaos’ (2019: 43). The continuing build-up of financial instabilities and geopolitical tensions at the global scale (Durand 2024; Lapavitsas et al. 2023) undoubtedly threatens turbulent dynamics spilling over into ‘systemic chaos’. This in turn potentially (and historically) ‘signals the beginning of the transition from one hegemon to the next’ (Galanis et al. 2024: 8).

We have witnessed the continued movement by the world’s elites down a path that is taking us towards a widening and deepening human catastrophe. Mushrooming class inequality, the proliferation of wars without end, the explosion of the refugee crisis, and the rise of xenophobic neo-fascism and far right movements are among the symptoms that we have entered a period of systemic chaos analogous to the great catastrophe of the first half of the twentieth century (Silver 2019: 41)

While it may be conceivably argued that we are still in the ‘turbulent accumulation’ sub-(B-)phase of Galanis et al.’s (2024) reformulation of the SCA, Silver’s words in the passage directly above have only gained weight in the intervening years since they were written. Lapavitsas et al. (2023: 173) observe too that, ‘Hegemonic crises that were often – but not inevitably – accompanied by major wars led to the reorganisation of world affairs and the displacement of the powerful and affluent hegemon’. While an all-out military confrontation between the US and China and their respective allies – proxy wars and trade wars aside – still seems somewhat remote (not least given unprecedented US-China economic network interdependence, see Farrell & Newman 2023; Schindler et al. 2023b), neither does a détente appear to be on the horizon. Either way, as Lapavitsas et al. (2023: 186) argue, ‘The interregnum that commenced with the Great Crisis of 2007–09, marked by the Pandemic Crisis and the Russo-Ukrainian War, has witnessed the end of sole US hegemony’. This presents opportunities, particularly for ‘middle powers’ such as the EU, to leverage their strategic autonomy in (re)articulating an

independent position on international development policy. The EU can potentially mediate between the US and China, so that hopefully ‘existing tensions can be kept within bounds to allow for greater coordination and cooperation’ (Carmody, 2024, p. 16). Both East and West – Global North and Global South – clearly have lessons to learn from one another regarding (sustainable) Development policy successes and failures. ‘Greater cooperation for humanity’s survival will require a change in mindset in China, the BRICS[+], and the Western powers alike’ (Carmody 2024: 16).

Bi-directional emulation of Development policy discourse and practice is already evident (see Alami et al. 2021; Carmody 2024), though this (so far partial and selective) shared learning is often not explicitly acknowledged, with national geostrategic self-interest seemingly the main aim rather than global cooperation and (genuine) sustainable D/development. One possible alternative route suggests the (re)embedding of (state capitalist) international Development policy and partnership in existing and expanded global frameworks and agreements that stress localisation, locally-led development, and decolonisation (see Murphy et al. forthcoming). This approach could help to remedy democratic and solidaristic deficits across the emerging varieties of (so far neoliberal/authoritarian) state capitalist D/development (see Alami et al. 2021; Lapavitsas et al. 2023). More broadly, to counteract degenerative (neoliberal) capitalism, Fraser (2013) suggests a political-economic synergy of sorts, via an emancipatory countermovement that adopts strategic-progressive elements of political liberalism, marketisation, social democracy, social protection, class and social reproduction struggles, social imaginary, politics of recognition, anti-imperialism, and eco-socialist activism and planning.

A genuinely local/decolonised international Development regime fits naturally in dialectical tension with such a left social democratic or eco-socialist green post/developmental state (see DeMaria et al. 2023). This rearticulation runs counter to neoliberal/authoritarian varieties of localised/autonomous/decentralised international Development partnership, which aim to disproportionately shift risk and responsibility from the state to local actors as part of a broader privatisation and liberalisation agenda (see Hart, 2010). The latter ‘hands-off’ approach has (at best) contradictory developmental implications (notwithstanding unintended emancipatory potentials in certain circumstances) (ibid.).

Findings in section 4 of this paper bolster the view that the EU is drifting further from its international commitments on development cooperation, in the direction of a neoliberal/authoritarian state capitalist D/development regime that increasingly aligns with US foreign policy (see also Biba, 2024). This does not bode well for global cooperation on the meeting, and building upon, of sustainable development goals (SDGs) in line with planetary boundaries (see DeMaria et al., 2023).

3 Methodology – a critical perspective

In the remainder of the paper, we carry out a comparative critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) of several interrelated, if also somewhat distinct, EU Development policy positioning documents and parliamentary reports concerning the transparency and accountability of NGO funding in this space. *The European Consensus* (European Commission 2017, hereafter EUC-2017) policy position is the foundational statement on EU development cooperation, an intended touchstone for subsequent documents and reports in this area. *The Global Gateway Initiative* (European Commission, 2021, hereafter GGI-2021) is the latest iteration of the EU’s positioning on development cooperation. In between the publication of both documents, and perhaps helping to explain their contradictory divergence, the European Court of Auditors (2018, hereafter ECA-2018) concluded its report into the transparency and accountability of NGOs’ (part) funding through the EU. This also informed, most recently, an EU Parliament (2024, hereafter EUP-2024) motion and adopted resolution on the same topic following the eruption of the Qatargate scandal.

We track the discursive-ideological shift sequentially throughout the period of publication (2017-2024), placing this comparative critical discourse analysis in its broader political-economic context – thus highlighting, in particular, the Brexit referendum and Trump’s ascendancy to the US presidency in 2016 as an inflection point (see Carmody, 2019); as well as interventionist state responses to the Covid-19 pandemic as an accelerator of the rise of varieties of state capitalism, coupled with the ‘rise of China’ and ‘rise of the [Global] South’ in geo-political-economic affairs (Lapavitsas et al. 2023; Carmody 2024). Data analysis and coding are assisted by NVivo 14 computer software. Themes emerge through a process of primary and axial coding related to our primary research question(s). We trace discursive-ideological trends over time and between different types of related (policy and parliamentary) documents.

4 Document analysis – reshaping the EU international Development regime

The findings of our critical discourse analysis, indicate an ongoing rearticulation of EU international Development policy positioning and practice. Three key trends have emerged and consolidated over time: de-localisation, de-universalisation,

and de-risking. The following discussion is split into two subsections examining: 1) the shift over time from a universalist discourse that emphasised themes of partnership, multistakeholdership, and locally-led practice, to an EU-centric one that emphasises themes of undue foreign interference and the supposed need for greater funding transparency, accountability, and conditionality. Our findings indicate that this shift from global to regional interests and values was already unfolding between 2017 and 2021, but also that it seemed to accelerate following Qatargate as articulated in the parliamentary resolution of (EUP-)2024; and 2) the shift of *imputed meaning* within these discursive-ideological themes that indicates a similar direction of semiotic travel.

4.1 De-localising and de-universalising EU Development cooperation discourse

EUC-2017 places a strong emphasis on themes of (in order of magnitude) Development ‘partnership’, ‘cooperation’, ‘mutuality’, ‘localisation’, ‘multistakeholdership’, ‘inclusion’, ‘multilateralism’, ‘ownership’, and ‘empowerment’, with some passing reference also to global ‘justice’, ‘reparation’, and ‘citizenship’ – all broadly in line with the localisation agenda arising from development cooperation effectiveness debates. It also positions NGOs and support for civic space as central enablers of this policy.

‘In relation with partner countries, the EU and its Member States will put renewed emphasis on country ownership, partnership and dialogue, in order to contribute to greater effectiveness’ (EUC-2017: 42).

‘The EU and its Member States will deepen their partnerships with CSOs in support of sustainable development. They will promote an operating space and enabling environments for CSOs, with full public participation, to allow them to play their roles as independent advocates, implementers and agents of change, in development education and awareness raising and in monitoring and holding authorities to account.’ (EUC-2017: 43).

The relatively strong localisation discourse is supplemented in EUC-2017 by a (somewhat contradictory) discourse that stresses *universalist* ‘rights’, ‘access’, ‘diversity’, and ‘values’.^{vi} For example,

‘... the EU is guided by the universality, indivisibility, interrelatedness and interdependence of all human rights, the EU and its Member States will promote intercultural dialogue and cooperation and cultural diversity’ (EUC-2017: 16).

Additional examples abound, but a striking observation from our review of the later documents is the near disappearance of the language of localisation and universalism over time, barring a small handful of passing references. This is somewhat understandable in the case of ECA-2018, given that it is a technical report concerning EU funding to NGOs. However, the shift in the language used in GGI-2021 is less comprehensible. Here we find a dramatic decline in the use of terms such as ‘inclusion’, ‘multistakeholdership’, ‘partnership’, and ‘localisation’, coupled with a shift away from the language of human rights and universal values towards the language of European/EU values and interests. The GGI notes

‘In implementing the Global Gateway, the EU will work closely with like-minded partners to develop synergies between their respective efforts on connectivity and quality infrastructure with third countries and achieve the maximum impact in closing the global infrastructure gap’ (GGI-2021: 11).

Within this work, civil society and NGOs are still included as partners in building legitimacy and linkages with local communities, essentially co-opting this sector to serve the interests of investors and funders.

‘Those most affected by potential projects – local communities, businesses and partners – must have their full say through proper public consultations and civil society involvement.’ (GGI-2021: 3)

As we will see in the following sub-section, the underlying meanings have changed in this similar, if widely disproportionate, discourse between EUC-2017 and GGI-2021. Further, references to localisation and universalism continue to decline in EUP-2024. This decline starts to make more sense when viewed through the geo-historical-political-economic lens outlined in earlier sections of this paper. The ascent of Trump to the US presidency, alongside the Brexit referendum, in 2016 (both arguably political consequences of the 2008 financial crash and underlying contradictions of neoliberal capitalism), followed by the Covid-19 pandemic shock in 2020 and the accelerated rise of China and the Global South (particularly the BRICS(+) formation), have accentuated the sense of global crisis and contestation within the hegemonic imperial bloc. The ripples could be felt in (what remained of) the EU polity from 2016 onwards; and ripples turned into waves of change during the early 2020s (see Farrell & Newman 2023), with the Qatargate scandal crashing against an increasingly fractured political Union in 2022 (Harth et al. 2023). Each of these upward inflection points is followed closely by the publication of the documents in our sample: EUC-2017 and ECA-2018 following Trump/Brexit; GGI-2021 following Covid-19; and EUP-2024 following Qatargate and the Russia-NATO/Ukraine war. The rising counter-discourse to localisation and universalism becomes clearer in this contextual light.

Within this context of turbulence, a series of reports into the transparency and accountability of EU funding to i/NGOs culminated in the European Court of Auditors report (ECA-2018). The language of this report, given its technical accounting nature, is less politicised; but this didn't prevent the re-politicisation of its (relatively innocuous) findings post Qatargate, as evidenced in EUP-2024. The main themes to emerge from our coding of ECA-2018 are funding 'traceability' (by far the largest incidence), as well as NGO 'classification', 'monitoring', and 'oversight'. However, it is important to note that the main critique of the report points to inadequacies in the European Commission's reporting tools and processes. Its main recommendations focused on the improved collection, reporting, and monitoring of data as well as improved organisational classifications.

Interestingly, the European Commission pushed back against some of the ECA recommendations, in particular as these generate the potential to curtail and control NGO activities.

'as recording the NGO status is not a legal requirement and as NGOs do not have a legal definition, the accounting system does not record funds specifically challenged to the NGO sector' (Replies of the Commission to the Special Report of the ECA 2018: 1); '... any attempt at defining an NGO is to be balanced against the need to protect the operating space of NGOs' (ibid.: 2)

Setting aside any genuine issues of adequate traceability or definitional squabbles, there are no findings or implications in ECA-2018 of political corruption or misappropriation of funds. These conclusions contrast sharply with the discourse emerging in the parliamentary debates following Qatargate (Harth et al. 2023). Themes of 'corruption', 'conditionality', 'foreign influence', and 'control' emerge particularly strongly in EUP-2024, with respect to the EU's funding of i/NGOs, while barely featuring (if at all) in the preceding documents. EUP-2024 also contains some passing thematic references to third party/country 'entryism' and 'front organisations', alongside the emergence of a particularly strong discourse demanding i/NGO adherence to EU-centric 'values'. Some examples are again illustrative, with Qatargate doing the heavy lifting, short of any additional/systematic evidence of i/NGO misappropriation of EU funds.

'[The European Parliament i]s of the opinion that certain alleged corruption cases, which generated public discontent, such as Qatargate, could have been prevented through the consistent enforcement of existing transparency requirements and an obligation for involved entities, including NGOs, to disclose their sources of funding and their internal structures; notes that, in some cases, the involved entities profited from EU funding' (EUP-2024: para. 12). . . . '[The EP] Condemns the increase in the exploitation of EU funds against EU principles and values, especially when the use of funds and transfers to other organisations are not entirely traceable; warns of the danger of EU funds ultimately being used within corrupt circles and being subject to fraud and irregularities, foreign interference or entryism' (EUP-2024: para. 13). . . . 'exploitation of EU funds against EU rules, principles and values is on the rise; whereas individuals and front organisations, most often under foreign influence, seek to obtain EU financial support and the respectability that results from it, whatever the amount, but in reality use EU funds for activities that undermine fundamental EU principles and values' (EUP-2024: para. H).

The political formation of EUP-2024, and the requirement to amass enough votes to pass the resolution, means that that this distrustful geopolitical discourse around (generally ill-defined^{vii}) foreign interference and EU values is counterbalanced to an extent by the remnants of a localisation discourse keen to stress the democratic and human rights benefits of i/NGOs. These two discourses sit side by side in uneasy tension, with the protection of i/NGO autonomy and self-determination seemingly incorporated as something of an afterthought. It points to internal debate and unresolved conflict at best, and political cover at worst, in the document's (re)drafting.

'[The EP] r]ecalls that transparency and accountability should not be used to curtail the space for independent civil society or to silence critical voices' (EUP-2024: para. 10) and '[c]ommends the crucial role of NGOs in EU and non-EU countries in defending the rule of law and democratic values, fighting corruption and promoting human rights and democracy' (EUP-2024: para. 50) and '[i]s of the opinion that no margins of appreciation should be left for Member States to subject NGOs to fatally restrictive requirements and obligations' (EUP-2024: para. 29).

Yet, despite this recognition, the Parliament

'calls on all EU institutions to ensure far stricter implementation and enforcement and supervision of adherence to the current provisions on the EU transparency register' (EUP-2024: para. 43). And further '[c]alls on all NGOs and entities committed to full transparency and accountability, the EU Charter and promoting democratic and EU values, to request to be included in the Transparency Register when applying for EU funds' (EUP-2024: para. 46).

4.2 Strategic 'partners of choice': de-localisation and de-risking

In keeping with the emergence of an EU-centric values discourse in EUP-2024, an EU-centric rearticulation of 'partnership' in line with EU geostrategic interests is evident in GGI-2021. It is indicative of de-localisation of the EU's development cooperation discourse, especially when compared to the meanings imputed to partnership in EUC-2017. Far from decolonial

mutuality and local ownership of Development projects, GGI-2021 instead emphasises de-risking – of the donor state from foreign interference (Schindler et al. 2023b), and of international private financial investment from potential losses (through state subsidy and public-private partnership) (Gabor 2020). The EU (as a supranational institution) now sees itself in competition with China in particular, and BRICS(+) more generally, for leadership of geostrategic development cooperation partnerships. The emerging EU-centric discourse is thinly veiled with the remnants of a local/decolonisation or universalist agenda. Once again, these vying discourses co-exist in uneasy tension, with strong hints of political manoeuvring through a strategy of ideological-discursive attrition. The spectre of China/BRICS(+) looms large (Carmody 2024; Farrell & Newman 2023; Alami et al. 2021; Alami and Dixon 2024).

‘By offering a positive choice for global infrastructure development, Global Gateway will invest in international stability and cooperation and demonstrate how democratic values offer certainty and fairness for investors, sustainability for partners and long-term benefits for people around the world’ (GGI-2021: 2); ‘Global Gateway projects will be designed, developed and implemented in close cooperation and consultation with partner countries. Infrastructure projects will be based on the needs and opportunities that they identify for their local economies and local communities, as well as the EU’s own strategic interests’ (GGI-2021: 3); ‘We will cooperate with partner countries to enable their just energy transition and to diversify our clean energy supply at the same time’ (GGI-2021: 5); ‘We will also work with partner countries to invest in infrastructure for developing sustainable and resilient raw materials value chains’ (GGI-2021: 6).

De-risking is a central foundation of this policy, with NGOs and civil society as key enabling partners, as noted earlier, building legitimacy and linkages with local communities.

‘The EFSD+ [European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus] guarantees are offered on favourable, highly competitive conditions. They allow private investors to finance projects in more challenging markets, by assuming the risks of more unstable environments while avoiding market distortions’ (GGI-2021: 10); ‘. . . [W]e will develop Global Gateway together with partner countries and invite the active participation of civil society as well as the local private sector in our exchanges’ (GGI-2021: 14).

5 Discussion and conclusions

The ideological-discursive drift evident in our document analysis between 2017 and 2024 indicates at the very least a watering down and cordoning off of the EU’s international (locally-led) Development policy commitments and positionings. Our findings lend support to the geo-historical political economy framework and narrative outlined in section 2. The locally-led Development agenda has always been shot through with contradictions, given the backdrop of neoliberal capitalism against which its (partial and selective) implementation unfolded (Mohan and Stokke, 2000). What the period since the 2016 political earthquake in the hegemonic imperial West demonstrates, however, is that even the ideological discourse of localisation and universalism is waning in the face of rising (neoliberal/authoritarian/de-risking) state capitalism.

Under EUC-2017, locally-led development cooperation and (Eurocentric) universalism dominated the discourse. Multilateral cooperation is a much stronger theme here than in subsequent statements – in particular, the GGI-2021 and EUP-2024 – which introduce new and modified discourses around foreign interference, funding conditionality, transparency and accountability, EU-centric values and strategic interests, and de-risking. Short of any real evidential basis of a systematic problem in these respects, it appears that anti-NGO elements within the EU Parliament have weaponised the Qatargate scandal, which has much broader implications for political lobbying and corruption across all types of organisations, to reassert a pre-existing agenda.

Given the strained political environment, and the prominence of several widely publicised NGO governance failures/scandals in recent years, it is important for NGOs to engage with transparency and accountability debates and reform processes in good faith. At the same time, it is also imperative that NGOs do not cede the organisational autonomy and self-determination necessary for working across multiple funders and (political) geographies. NGOs also stand to benefit from strategic autonomy in their development cooperation partnerships in an increasingly multi-polar/multi-lateral global political economy. It behoves the EU to grant NGOs the same strategic autonomy that it also cannot itself ignore due to existing trading relationships, the diversity of member states’ foreign and trade policy positionings, and the shifting geographies of historical capitalism and global hegemonic power. Unelected and unaccountable supranational foreign, trade, and security policy positioning is not a recipe for a stable political-economic Union in the present climate post Brexit. Better for the EU to provide guidance to member states by recommitting to multilateral locally-led sustainable D/development.

This paper has attempted to bring greater clarity to the possible pathways forward for the EU – by placing its widening D/development contradictions in world-historical context, and through comparative analysis of several touchstone policy positions and reports in the years since Brexit. D/development regime shifts have accelerated as the structural crisis of globalised and financialised neoliberal capitalism has deepened. The coming months and years will be instructive as to the

shape of things to come. The indications are bleak for substantive localisation and decolonisation of international Development policy through global inter-state cooperation. The more likely direction of travel appears to be a sharpening of hegemonic crisis and contestation/conflict in the global political economy. This tracks with the rise of (varieties of) state capitalism in the global D/development regime, and the consequent silencing of civil society organisations and the localisation agenda. Regional power blocs and formations are gaining influence at the expense of multilateral organisations: competition rather than cooperation is the order of the day. But the winds of change are volatile, and precision in prediction is futile: those hoping and struggling for a better world will need to shape and seize the opportunities that arise. The legacies of multilateralism and global civil society will be difficult to erase entirely and may reassert themselves in surprising new forms as events unfold. Democratic and participatory governance reform is crucial to the legitimacy and effectiveness of i/NGOs as sustainable post/development actors and change makers.

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Notes

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- ⁱ Geography, School of Natural Sciences, Trinity College Dublin. Susan.p.murphy@tcd.ie; cimcmaho@tcd.ie
- ⁱⁱ Though neither can a continuing period of deepening institutional inertia, instability, and crisis be ruled out.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Taken to include state-owned enterprises, sovereign wealth funds, and state-owned banks.
- ^{iv} Harvey notes that, 'There have been hundreds of financial crises around the world since 1973, compared to very few between 1945 and 1973' (2010, p. 8).
- ^v Themes are generally listed according to order of magnitude (i.e. number of codes) throughout section 4 of this paper. The precise number of codes is not reported for each theme, as relative magnitudes are deemed more relevant and insightful, alongside the (changing) qualitative meanings imputed to codes. However, the coding structure and NVivo analysis (including quantitative coding data) is available upon request from the authors of this paper.
- ^{vi} The Eurocentric genesis of supposedly universalist human rights and values cannot be ignored (Brohman, 1995; Wallerstein, 1997).
- ^{vii} See Harth et al. (2023). Though EUP-2024 proposes restricting EU funding to 'all EU funding beneficiaries, including NGOs, that have misused or misappropriated EU funds, or engaged in activities contrary to the EU values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union and the EU Charter, including inciting terrorism, hate speech, supporting or glorifying violence, political and religious extremism as well as spreading disinformation under the disguise of intentionally falsified scientific data' (para. 50). These are of course contested terms that many in the Global South would ascribe to Western neo/colonialist adventurism, past and present (see Hickel, 2017).